

that man deeply and wanted to do him real hurt. And now she felt the same kind of hatred for Jay.

She lay in bed without sleeping, waiting for Jay, but not in the mood he anticipated. Dawn was creeping along the walls when the bell rang. Mattie raked up a window and craned out her giraffe neck. She had on a white nightcap and looked like a scarifying ghost.

'Who's it?'

'It's me - Jay.'

'Wait a minute.'

Mattie opened the closet where she kept her soiled linen and took out a little bandanna bundle that she had made of Jay's rags of a suit, his old greasy cap, his old shoes, and the remains of his silk shirt.

'Theah's you' stuff. Take a walk.'

The bundle fell against Jay, nearly knocking him over. Mattie raked down the window. The sleet blew in Jay's face and the wind sang round his rump. He turned up his collar and walked shivering toward Lenox Avenue.

FRANK COLLYMORE

The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals

I have a strange admission to make; but, since I regard myself as already dead, I have no reason to conceal anything: these words of mine are, as far as anything written by mortal hand can be, the truth.

I am fully persuaded that among our manifold emotional interests and activities there is some one or other which, very often unacknowledged, perhaps even unsuspected, is nevertheless the ruling and abiding passion; and this passion may range from those of the crudest and most blatant forms of expression, through an infinity of subtle changes, to others, so unusual, and, at times, so inexplicable, as to evoke from us halting excuses, if not a positive denial.

I make no such excuse or denial: my great passion on earth has been the attending of funerals.

Perhaps this may not be such a strange admission after all: there is something in each and every one of us, especially as we grow older, that tends to receive a sort of satisfaction, a happy consolation, in attending the funeral of some old acquaintance: we are not so much rejoicing that the man whom we knew in his boyhood days is gone from us for ever, but that we, perhaps as the result of our own excellence, or else perhaps safeguarded by some especial providence, have been successful in continuing this business of living, and to observe yet another of our contemporaries fall out of line. This, I think, will be reluctantly admitted by all, especially by those who have their best days behind them, and who, by dint of careful and temperate living, have so far escaped the inevitable end. Each funeral attended is, as it were, a triumphant feather in our cap registering our defiance of fate; and we hold up our heads the bolder,

almost convincing ourselves that we shall continue indefinitely to escape the essential condition of mortality.

And, alas, in my particular case, I *had* succeeded in thus convincing myself: until this afternoon I was assured that this matter of dying, of being for ever hidden beneath the green surface of the earth, was not for me; rather, that this procedure, which I had viewed so often, was indeed a performance enacted for my own personal benefit, from which I should always continue to derive an ever-increasing aesthetic delight.

I cannot hope to explain the sources of this delight; my understanding of the nature of the aesthetic response or of the laws of psychology is too superficial to permit me to make any attempt to do so; but of one thing I am quite sure: there was no sadistic strain in my pleasure, no suggestion of deliberate enjoyment in the grief of those left behind to mourn, no relish in the thought that the deceased had met with a final punishment. Very often, on the contrary, mingled with that sense of rapture with which funerals alone could provide me, I experienced a state of profound melancholy and loss, of sympathy with the mourners, of compassion for all suffering humanity.

It was always thus with me. Among the earliest recollections of my childhood years, there stand out boldest those of my disposing by burial of the corpses of such of our household pets or feathered stock as happened to have died from natural causes. I grieved at their deaths, but rejoiced at their inhumation. And, very often when there was no obliging little corpse to hand, I would bury one of my dolls. There was a lovely little cemetery in one corner of our garden which came into being under my devoted hands.

At the age of nine I attended my first real funeral, my father's. I can still recall every moment of that sunny, windswept afternoon.

And, as I grew older, I would pester my mother to allow me to go to the funerals of any of our relatives or friends or important persons in the community of whose deaths I might have heard. And, more often than not, she would allow me to go with one of my uncles.

And how I admired the elegant costumes of the gentlemen: the impressive, fascinating frock coats and top hats, their suave and mysterious blackness, their stateliness, their pageantry, their austerity: proud

symbols of the dignity and authority of man! My mother's gift to me on my twenty-first birthday was such an outfit. But, alas, the wearing of the frock coat was a fashion whose days were already numbered. I compromised, later, with the morning coat; during the passing of the years my wardrobe has never been without two or three of these most necessary garments.

In our small community there are few opportunities for one to appear thus formally clad: an infrequent wedding, some official function, perhaps. I could, of course, have continued the old custom of attending church services, but at an early age I had become an agnostic, and therefore not even my vanity would allow me to distress my conscience thus. But there were many other far more important occasions.

You may conclude from the foregoing that my personal vanity was a prime motive for what was fast becoming my overruling passion. But I assure you that this was not so. Always a fine figure of a man, I admit that I derived no small degree of satisfaction on appearing in correct attire at all the funerals I attended: and I must confess, for I wish to conceal not even my most secret offences, that I tended to despise and regard with unmixed contempt those who dared venture into the precincts of death not properly dressed; but all this was purely coincidental, relatively unimportant.

You may think it strange in me, morbid perhaps, that such should have been my chief preoccupation, when other young men, of my own age, were playing games, dancing, drinking, wenching, falling in love, getting married, and making their homes secure for themselves and their children.

I never had any desire to participate in games of any kind: in the tropics the sun works havoc with one's complexion. I had no hobbies beyond a brief excursion in philately, rudely terminated by the dishonesty of a close friend. (And I must confess here in parenthesis that his was one of the very few funerals at which my delight was not unreservedly aesthetic.) Dancing bored me; I had no sense of rhythm. My hesitant experiments in drinking and sexual indulgence left me nauseated. I had no talent for music or for art, and appreciation of them was quite beyond me. I read quite a great deal, biography especially. Poetry I could not understand, and the novel I found distressingly vulgar. I had not the

necessary mental equipment to take more than a cursory interest in the scientific discoveries of our times.

I never married. I never met a woman to whom I could accord perfection, and I was determined that nothing short of perfection would entice me to surrender my peace of mind to the exigencies of the marital state; moreover, the financial complexities of such a state dismayed me. I did fall in love once, but of that I shall speak in its proper context. When my dear mother departed this life, there remained my three sisters to whom I could always, until but recently, look for companionship, affection, and consolation. I led a very happy, if uneventful life. I worked hard at the office; I earned the respect and warm regard of my employers; in time I was admitted into partnership in the business. I have never known what it is like to be ill for even a day. A careful observer, unacquainted with me, could never have imagined that I was nearly sixty years of age.

And so, for many years I pursued my methodical, completely satisfying way of living. Indeed, I became something of a local celebrity. I had even heard it said that it could not be claimed for anyone who was someone in our community to have been properly interred unless I was present. And, to my credit, I think, I must state that I allowed no social distinction to influence my attendance. Rich or poor; white or coloured: it was sufficient for me to have known the individual in question, or to be acquainted with one or other of the bereaved relatives – I say nothing, of course, of all those whom I know personally – for me to put in an appearance. I always went alone, for I had discovered at an early age that my friends were not always as meticulous as I in their choice of attire, and I was always conscious, if I may thus express it, of the subtle frisson of admiration, I might almost say, of mental applause, that ran through the gathering on my arrival. Many other faces were almost as familiar as mine on such occasions, for I would not have you think that this passion of mine is an altogether singular one; but I can safely assert, and prove my assertion, that I had outdistanced my nearest rival by ten point five to one. For from my seventeenth year I have kept a careful compilation of these attendances. Over this period of time they average about thirteen a month. If one multiplies this figure by the necessary number of months and years (I have already mentioned that I am nearly

sixty: fifty-nine and one month to be quite exact), one will have a pretty fair idea of my performance.

I do not mind admitting that in my early days, before I was in a position to purchase either a carriage or a car, this matter of transport proved a rather expensive item on my budget. But on this score I have no regrets. I was always thrifty, and, as I have stated already, even in those far-off days, I had few vices. No: I always lived quietly, returning home from the office, taking my afternoon stroll, that is, when I was not engaged in my recreation, discussing with my dear sisters (all, alas, now departed: Elspeth, the last to go, died last November) the topics of the day; retiring for the night happy in the knowledge of having committed no misdemeanour, of leaving no duty undone; and awaking next morning, fresh as the proverbial daisy, and, as far as was consonant with my dignity, scampering downstairs to turn with eager expectancy to the obituary notices in the morning newspaper.

And now I must make a further admission, one of far-reaching importance and consequence. As the years went by, some time about my forty-ninth year to be more exact, I made a startling discovery: I was able to foretell the approach of death from a close observation of the faces of those whom I would meet from time to time at funeral gatherings. I cannot hope to explain *how* I knew; all I can say is that it was quite some time before I was consciously aware of this rare gift that had been bestowed upon me; but indeed, I almost refused to credit it, until, as the result of a series of tests, most rigorously conducted, I was under no possible doubt whatsoever. I would note someone or other at a funeral, would perceive some unaccountable and unwonted something in his expression, some unmistakable token, the significance of which could point to but one conclusion. It was indeed as though I had acquired the power of glimpsing, for one fleeting and rewarding moment, the hollow energy of the underlying skull peering through its mask of dissolving flesh. And I would find myself saying to myself, in as matter of fact a way as one might similarly congratulate oneself on being alive on such and such a beautiful day, 'Well, old man, it won't be long for *you* now,' and in a comparatively short while I would find myself reading his obituary notice.

I began to scrutinize the faces of persons more closely, to make more

elaborate computations; and I discovered that it became increasingly more simple for me to foretell the death of the person under observation. In fact, during this last year I was seldom off more than a day or two at most.

You will therefore understand that this perusal of the obituary notices in the morning newspapers had become more than a mere matter of information: they contained the confirmation of my judgement; and I see no reason to disguise the fact that this afforded me considerable pride.

I must withdraw the reservation stated at the end of the fourth preceding paragraph: I would literally scamper downstairs.

So it came about that this morning on making my descent I slipped and struck my head against the balustrade. I was stunned for a moment. It left me an ugly bruise on my forehead, and I was annoyed with myself. Such a thing had never happened to me before. And to increase my discomfiture, on turning to the important page in the paper, I read that Mary Ellen Wye was to be buried that afternoon. I was indeed exceedingly hurt that one or other of her brothers had not notified me personally. True, I had not seen the deceased lady for well over twenty years, had not conversed with her for nearly twice as long a time; yet I saw her brothers very often, and, to a certain extent, I still regarded myself as one of the family. For I must tell you that many years ago Mary Ellen and I had almost become engaged to be married. Of all the young women I had ever known, she, and she alone, most closely approached that quality of perfection of which I have spoken. Almost, but not quite attained it, for, despite the fact that we had all grown up together, it was not until I had broached the subject of our impending engagement to my mother and sisters that I learnt with amazement and horror that her grandmother had been the illegitimate child of a garrison officer and a common servant-girl.

She had never married. And now she was dead. Somehow the knowledge that I would be going to her funeral depressed me. This state of depression was a novel experience. It was quite beyond my comprehension.

I went to the office, as usual; I sent a wreath to her home; but I could

feel none of that excitement, none of the usual emotions, which such a treat in store usually engendered, flood my being.

I came home early. I was irritated by the unsightly bruise on my forehead. It was very painful to the touch, and I realized it would be quite impossible for me to don my top hat. Very well, I would go (I almost smiled to myself as I realized how I was being forced into doing what I had so long inveighed against) bareheaded. I had a cup of tea. I began to dress.

Then I had a sudden spell of dizziness. I had to recline on my bed for some time before I could complete my toilet. I looked at my watch. It was already eleven minutes past five. I should have to hurry.

It was a bright afternoon. A bank of sullen cloud hung low in the west; there was but little breeze; an unusual coppery glow seemed to pervade everything.

The funeral was, fortunately, at St Moystyn's on the outskirts of the city, only half a mile away. There is little or no traffic at this time of evening, and I was soon there. I parked my car and glanced anxiously at my watch. But, as I entered the quaint little churchyard, I realized how very late I was: the coffin had already been borne to the family vault. The parson was more than halfway through the service. I stood still for a moment, looking at the gathering, and I experienced a sensation of profound disgust. God, I thought, what is our society coming to! Among them all, except for the undertaker in his ill-fitting tubular costume of shiny black, there wasn't another single soul, except one of Mary Ellen's brothers, who wasn't in ordinary everyday wear: tweeds, serges, gaberdines of various shades of blue, grey and brown: a sorry sight to contemplate. They might have been a group of nondescripts chosen haphazardly from a cocktail party. My annoyance and depression were intensified by this shocking spectacle. I shuddered, and involuntarily drawing myself up to my full height, I joined them.

I have already mentioned the strange coppery glow of the evening; in this garish light everything appeared slightly different somehow. And as I blinked my eyes and looked around me, I could hardly give credence to what I saw. At first I thought it might have been some trickery of the weird light, but after a moment's consideration I was positive that it was not; for, as I glanced from one face to another, I became aware,

completely and without any shadow of doubt, that the dread impress of imminent dissolution, of which I have already spoken, lay stark upon almost each and every one of those present. It was altogether astonishing, and, needless to say, quite unprecedented. There was standing next to me John Wadell, the accountant. His skin was the colour of that of a man stricken with acute jaundice; the flesh hung in flaccid wattles from his face, his eyes were completely empty of expression or purpose. Indeed, as far as I was concerned, he might have been already dead, as he stood there, his eyes staring into nothingness. Beside him was Dr Hope, for years my sisters' medical practitioner. A ruddy-faced old fellow, he now looked bleached; such colour as remained in his baggy cheeks might have been daubed on by some inexperienced hand at an amateur theatrical performance: you could almost see the blood being slowly drained out of him to coagulate in those two unhealthy splotches. And as I hastily glanced from one face to another near by, at the face of Manley Davis, the dry-goods merchant, at that of Arthur Grimswold of Grimswold Mansions, even at those of the comparatively young King-Lord twins, born on my thirtieth birthday, I could see only leaden faces, saffron faces, waxen faces, livid faces, all of them almost drained of their living essence, all sealed with the sure expectancy of swiftly approaching death.

And as I stood there, speculating on the nature of the oncoming epidemic which was to disperse such wholesale mortality, the full import of what I had seen almost overwhelmed me. Gone were the petty annoyances and depressions of the day; I was caught up in something so stupendous that I could only with difficulty conceal my excitement. I felt myself possessed with a sense of more than physical exhilaration; almost as though, and I hope you will understand what I am trying to express, for I can find no other way of describing it, almost as though I were in process of becoming a god. I state this in all truthfulness, and I venture to say, in all humility. But this is how it appeared to me. Here I was, aware of these petty mortals, clustered in ant-like formation about the grave, aware of their absurd limitation, and so far, far above them in the plenitude of my omniscience. I regarded them with a sense of overweening contempt and scorn; yet, in some strange way, there was in my exalted state of soaring ecstasy, still room for pity.

I note this extenuating circumstance at this moment with some small degree of satisfaction. God knows, I, too, am in dire need of pity, now.

The vault sealed, the wreaths laid on, the mourners moved away in bleak groups. I advanced and shook hands, murmuring a few conventional words of sympathy with the brothers who all, I was surprised to observe, despite the imprint of death on their faces, regarded me somewhat strangely: there was in their attitude not only an ill-designed disapproval of seeing me there, but almost, though I could not understand it at the time, a recoiling such as might have been due to some physical revulsion. Perhaps it was the bruise on my forehead, I thought, for it was, I am compelled to admit, an ugly sight: or was it that I was without my top hat? For I could not, would not, believe that they grudged my paying my last respects to the woman whom they had said often enough I had callously jilted.

But even this ungraciousness on their part could not adversely affect my demeanour towards them. I shook hands with them compassionately, not only on account of their bereavement, but forgiving them their resentment, everything, in the certain knowledge that within three months at most, all three of them, Willy the eminent solicitor, Herbert the MCP, and Arthur, poor shiftless Arthur who had never done an honest day's work in all his life, would be occupying, well, if not the vault with Mary Ellen, some other, or else some cubic feet of space beneath the mould. It was so sad that I could almost have afforded to impart to my words of sympathy a sincerity which I do not often experience. But, infused as I was with this secret knowledge and sense of superhuman power, it was all I could do to prevent myself from shrieking with laughter. Yes, Herbert, the dignified Herbert, one of the few remaining adherents to correct attire for every occasion, would be the first to go. It would be less than a fortnight for him.

The light filtered through the spreading, bare limbs of the flamboyants, gathering, as the evening progressed, more and more intensity; the corpse faces passed me by and departed. I watched them all go. And then I could give way to my laughter, for I knew that for most of them, the next time they attended a funeral ceremony it would be they who would play the all-important role.

The uncanny light flooded the sky. I looked up to it and stretched

out arms to it: almost a sacramental gesture, a symbol, as it were, of my apotheosis.

After a few moments I walked out of the churchyard and approached my car. Never have I felt so completely and absolutely at one with everyone and everything. I could have danced my way home. As I drew near the car, I noticed that two little urchins were peeping into it, fingering something. I shouted at them, and they jumped down and ran away.

I got into the car, noticing without surprise that my forehead was aching, had been aching, indeed, all the time. But this was of no consequence. I remember I began to sing. And then I observed that something was wrong. Those two urchins had been fiddling with my rear-view mirror. It was facing the setting sun and the unearthly light appeared to be focused directly upon it. I leaned forward to adjust it.

And, as I did so, I saw, peering into it, a face, such a face as I have never seen, a face which I am determined never to see again. For it was the face of death itself: the remorseless blank eyes, void of every hope or fear known to mortal men, staring from a torn covering of all but putrescent flesh; and, as in an X-ray photograph, through the shadowy open mouth, arrested in an attitude of song, the vacuous grin of the abiding skeleton.

I looked around. Who in God's name, could be playing such a ghastly joke on me? It was quite a little while before I realized I was gazing at my own reflection in the rear-view mirror of my car.

It is now eight minutes past midnight. I have finished with exactly twelve minutes to spare. I have already written Herbert Wye asking him to make all the necessary arrangements. Whom else can I ask? There must be at least one person there suitably attired.

JEAN RHYS

Fisby Waters

THE EDITOR

The Dominica Herald

March 3rd, 189—

Dear Sir,

Yesterday I heard a piece of news that appalled me. It seems that a British workman, Mr Longa by name, who arrived a year ago, has been arrested and is being held by the police. Mr Longa is a carpenter. He is also a socialist, and does not disguise his political opinions. It goes without saying that a certain class of person in this island, who seem to imagine that the colour of their skins enables them to behave like gods, disliked and disapproved of him from the first. He was turned out of Miss Lambton's boarding-house after one night and had the greatest difficulty in finding anywhere to live. Eventually he settled in a predominantly negro quarter — another cause for offence. A determined effort was made to induce him to leave the island. When this failed, with their usual hypocrisy they pretended to ignore him, but they were merely biding their time.

He was found joking roughly with one of the many vagabond children who infest the streets of Roseau, and is to be accused of child-molesting and cruelty, if you please. A trumped-up charge, on the face of it. In this way, they plan to be rid of a long-standing nuisance and to be able to boast about their even-handed justice. The hypocrisy of these people, who bitterly resent that they no longer have the power over the bodies and minds of the blacks they once had (the cruelty of West Indian planters was a byword), making a scapegoat of an honest British workman, is enough to make any decent person's gorge rise. A London